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ABSTRACT

A study examined the frequency with which males and females are represented in picture books available in preschool classrooms. Three areas were examined: pronoun usage and gender of characters; the frequency of gender-neutral pronouns and characters; and written text compared to teachers' wording when reading aloud. The study involved 11 head and assistant teachers and 4 student teachers in 4 preschool classrooms in a university-affiliated child care facility. Data were collected through an examination of 129 classroom books, observation of teachers during 52 story sessions, and questionnaires to determine how the teachers chose books for the classroom and how they changed the text when reading aloud. Study findings included the following: (1) in library corner books, male characters appeared 1.8 times as frequently as females, with females comprising only 22% of the sample; (2) masculine pronouns were used as generics 3.4 times as frequently as female pronouns; (3) books read aloud by teachers demonstrated similar representations of male and female characters; and (4) questionnaire responses suggested that gender-biased language may not be a primary consideration for teachers in choosing books. The effects of books' use of predominantly masculine characters and language can be detrimental to girls' gender role socialization. Teachers can ameliorate these effects by choosing and reading books with a balance of male and female characters and by altering wording to improve this balance. (AC)

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Gender Equity in Picture Books in Preschool Classrooms:

An Exploratory Study

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Introduction

Between the ages of three and five, children begin to demonstrate gender stereotyped preferences for toys and activities (Etaugh, 1983). Explanations for how children acquire gender role stereotypes involve children learning through observation and direct instruction that persons, things, and concepts can be classified as masculine or feminine (Huston, 1983). For many children, preschool is one of their first exposures to direct teaching of societal norms. In this way, the preschool curriculum can have a strong effect on the development of children's gender role attitudes. The purpose of the present study was to examine how one aspect of curriculum, children's literature, represents males and females.

Over the past 20 years, researchers have paid increasing attention to the portrayal of male and female characters in children's literature. Unequal representation and stereotyped depictions of males and females in award winning children's books have been well documented (Heintz, 1987; Kolbe & LaVoie, 1981; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972; Williams, Vernon, Williams, & Malecha, 1987). Researchers have also found similar patterns of gender bias in books which teachers select to read out loud to children (Luke, Cooke, & Luke, 1986; Smith, Greenlaw, & Scott, 1987).

While most studies of award winning books have focused on the occupational and behavioral roles of their characters, some

have also examined the frequency with which male and female characters appear in the books. A study of Caldecott Award winning books published between 1967 and 1971, found that nearly one-third of the books contained no female characters, and only 11% of the books contained female central characters. In the books' illustrations, there were eleven times as many illustrations of males as of females, and illustrations of male animals outnumbered those of female animals ninety-five to one (Weitzman, et al., 1972).

More recent Caldecott Award winning books have demonstrated a more equitable ratio of male to female characters. A study of Caldecott winners published between 1980 and 1985 found that 33% contained female central characters while 54% contained male central characters, and that illustrations of males outnumbered those of females 2.5 to 1 (Williams, et al., 1987). While this represents an increase in visibility of females since the 1967 to 1971 period, the frequency with which females appeared was still underrepresentative of the ratio of males to females in the general population.

While studies of Caldecott winners may be an indication of the highest standards of the publishing industry for a particular year, they do not necessarily represent the books which teachers actually choose for their classrooms. Elementary teachers who were asked to list their favorite books to read aloud to children reported more books about males than about females, only 21% of

which contained a female protagonist (Smith, et al., 1987). The ten most popular book choices by these elementary teachers included an even smaller proportion of female characters, as eight of these books had male protagonists, and only one had a sole female protagonist (Smith, et al., 1987). When student teachers were asked to select a book which they thought children would benefit from, 74% of the selections featured males as primary characters, while only 19% featured females (Luke, et. al, 1986). These findings suggest that although recently published books contain a higher proportion of female characters, teachers do not necessarily choose these books for their classrooms. What must be studied is the actual books which are made available to children in their classrooms.

Another area which requires further study is the language used to refer to males and females in children's literature. While existing research has thoroughly examined character portrayals and representation, there is a lack of research on the use of generic pronouns in these books. In English, if the gender of a noun is unspecified, the generic masculine is prescribed. In this context, pronouns such as "he" are not intended to infer masculinity, but instead to encompass both genders (Strunk & White, 1979). Adults do not demonstrate a complete understanding of this grammatical rule, and often interpret "generic" masculine terms as referring only to males

(Hyde, 1984; Kidd, 1971; MacKay, 1980; MacKay & Fulkerson, 1979; Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978; Schneider & Hacker, 1973).

Young children may be even more likely to interpret generic pronouns as referring specifically to one gender, since children react literally to language (Johnson & Kelly, 1975). Also, since gender role behaviors and attitudes vary according to age and may be related to cognitive level, young children use and interpret generic pronouns differently than do adults (Fisk, 1985). In a study of 310 school-aged children, only 28% of first graders, 32% of third graders, and 42% of fifth graders stated that "he" could refer to both males and females (Hyde, 1984). This level of understanding is demonstrated by children's actual interpretation of masculine pronouns. Evidence suggests that an overwhelming percentage of kindergarten and first grade children (i.e., 96%) interpret the word "he" in stories as referring to a boy (Fisk, 1985). Therefore, the use of masculine pronouns can further decrease the visibility of females in children's books. However, even if the written text of a book does not use masculine generics, adults reading out loud tend to label gender neutral characters as male significantly more often than as female (DeLoache, Carpenter, & Cassidy, 1987).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the frequency with which males and females are represented in picture books available in preschool classrooms. Attempts were made to overcome the limitations of previous research in several ways.

First, pronoun usage and gender of characters in books available to the children were examined, as opposed to award winning books, that may or may not be found in classrooms. Second, the actual written text of books was compared to the wording which teachers used when reading those books aloud, to determine whether teachers alter pronoun usage as they read aloud. Finally, the frequency of neutral pronouns and characters was examined, as opposed to only masculine and feminine characters.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 11 head and assistant teachers and four student teachers in four preschool classrooms in a university affiliated child care facility. Head teachers held master's or bachelor's degrees in early childhood education or child development. Assistant teachers held associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees in child development, psychology, music, or elementary education. Student teachers were undergraduate students enrolled in a child development course. All of the teachers were female. Each classroom contained 20 children. In two of the classrooms, the mean age of the children was 43 months, and in two classrooms, the mean age was 54 months.

Procedure

Data was collected through examination of classroom books, observation of the teachers, and administration of questionnaires to the teachers. Staffing varied among the classrooms, so all

teachers were not observed for an equal number of sessions. Books present in the library corners of two classrooms (one of each age group) were examined on eight non-consecutive days over a three-week period. These books were obtained by the teachers primarily from public libraries and personal collections, and were available to the children in the classroom throughout the day. Occurrences of generic pronouns present in the written text, and the noun to which the pronoun referred were recorded. Each pronoun was then coded as masculine, feminine, or neutral. Occurrences of male, female, and neutral characters and central characters were also recorded.

Eight sessions of "story time," during which a teacher read a book or told a story out loud to a large group of children, were observed on non-consecutive days over a four-week period in each of the four classrooms and audiotaped. During these observations, the occurrences of generic pronouns spoken by the teacher as she read or told a story were recorded. The noun to which the pronoun referred was identified. Each pronoun was then coded as masculine, feminine, or neutral. Occurrences of male, female, and neutral characters and central characters were also recorded. After the story was read, each book was examined in the same manner as were the library corner books.

For coding purposes, generic pronouns were considered to be those which referred to persons, animals, and personified objects which possess no inherent biological sex characteristics. This

category also includes persons, animals, and objects which can only be identified as male or female through external cues, such as clothing, names, or references by a gendered pronoun. Masculine pronouns were "he," "him," and "his." Feminine pronouns were "she," "her," and "hers". Neutral pronouns were "it," "its," "they," "them," and "their."

Upon completion of the observations, the 11 head and assistant teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire containing open-ended questions which asked how they chose books for the classroom, and how they changed text in books when reading aloud.

Results

During the observation period, 129 different books were present in the observed classrooms. However, a book that was present in the classroom during more than one observation was recorded separately for each observation that it was present. This resulted in a count of all pronouns and story characters that children in the classroom had access to on a daily basis. When these books were counted separately, the sample included 471 books. Fifty-two stories were read out loud by teachers to groups of children.

Proportions of gendered characters in story books appear in Table 1. In the library corner books, male characters appeared

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Insert Table 1 about here

1.8 times as frequently as did females. Most of the characters were male or neutral, and females comprised only 22% of the sample. When only central characters were considered, this disparity increased. Males appeared as central characters three times as frequently as did females, and comprised 70% of all central characters, while only 24% were female. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests revealed significant differences in the frequency with which male and female characters were portrayed in the books (all p values < .001).

The language in the library corner books also demonstrated few references to females (see Table 2). Masculine pronouns

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Insert Table 2 about here

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accounted for half of all generic pronouns, and were used as generics 3.4 times as frequently as were feminine pronouns. Only 15% of generic pronouns were feminine. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests revealed significant differences in proportions of masculine and feminine pronouns in the books (all p values < .001).

Similar representations of male and female characters were demonstrated in the books which the teachers chose to read out

loud to children (see Table 1). In these books, male characters appeared 1.7 times as frequently as did females, who comprised only 24% of the sample. As in the library corner books, most central characters were male, comprising 65% of the sample, while only 29% of the central characters were female.

Teachers read masculine generic pronouns 3.3 times as frequently as they did feminine generics, and only 16% of the generic pronouns read aloud were feminine (see Table 2). When reading aloud, the teachers also tended to add pronouns which were not present in the written text. Most of the added pronouns were masculine, leading to a greater proportion of masculine pronouns in the book than had been present in the original written text.

Three head and three assistant teachers completed the questionnaire. Their responses suggested that gender-biased language may not be a primary consideration for teachers when choosing books, although several teachers reported an awareness of gender-bias issues. Two teachers responded that they attempt to select and to read books which contain a variety of gender roles, and that they alter wording to make stories less sexist. One of these teachers also reported that she usually labels animals which could be either gender female when she reads aloud. Another teacher reported that she does not change pronouns to avoid stereotypes. All six teachers reported that they change the wording of books which the read aloud, usually to paraphrase

a long story or to modify vocabulary which the children may not understand, but did not indicate that they purposely change pronoun usage.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that the books available to preschool children in their classroom contain an inequitable ratio of male to female characters and language. Although the proportion of male characters and masculine pronouns is not overwhelming, there is a noticeable invisibility of females in both these areas.

Neutral pronouns accounted for one-third of the generic pronouns present in both library corner books and books read out loud. These findings suggest that male bias in language may not be overwhelming, since neutral pronouns by definition do not infer gender or gender characteristics. Neutral language, however, is often interpreted as referring to males. Young children (Gelb, 1989; Patt, 1992) and adults (DeLoache, et al., 1987; Gelb, 1989) have been shown to use masculine pronouns significantly more than feminine or neutral pronouns to refer to animals or people when their gender is unknown. This leads to a near invisibility of females in children's literature and language.

Books play an important role in gender role socialization by providing children with information about societal values, as

well as providing role models for what they can and should be as adults (Peterson & Lach, 1990; Weitzman, et al., 1972; Williams, et al., 1987). Written and spoken language also influences gender role socialization by providing direct information about the existence or invisibility of males and females in various roles or in society as a whole (McConnell-Ginet, 1970; Sheldon, 1990). This influence is especially powerful for young children today, since an increasing number are attending preschool and day care programs, in which picture books play a major role (Peterson & Lach, 1990). But the language of picture books does not present an accurate portrayal of the existence of males and females in the world. The practice of using masculine pronouns as generic encourages children to develop the distorted and non-scientific belief that there are more males than females, that males are more important than females, and that only males can perform certain roles (Gelb, 1989; Johnson & Kelly, 1975; Sheldon, 1990). When children behave in accordance with these beliefs, they perpetuate gender role stereotypes, which limit behavioral, academic, and occupational options for both males and females (Bem, 1983; Flerx, Fidler, & Rogers, 1976; Katz, 1986).

This practice is especially detrimental to girls, who are made invisible through the use of predominantly masculine language, and who are receiving the message that they are not as important as boys (Moulton, et al., 1978; Sprung, 1975). Weitzman and colleagues (Weitzman, et al., 1972) wrote, "It is

easy to imagine that the little girl reading these books might be deprived of her ego and her sense of self [p. 1130]." Even if the lack of female representation in children's books does not lead to this kind of psychological distress, it still affects girls in a direct manner. Children's literature does not present girls with an accurate portrayal of all the roles which they can perform and the settings in which they can participate.

Although children's literature demonstrates bias against females, teachers can decrease the extent to which children in their classrooms are exposed to this bias. Teachers can choose books which contain a balance of male and female characters. The present study indicates that teachers do not read books verbatim to children, and are even aware that they modify the language of books as they read. This suggests that teachers can learn to alter their language to include more feminine or neutral pronouns when reading out loud, and can label neutral characters as female to increase female representation. However, these practices require conscious effort. Despite two decades of research advocating the elimination of gender-bias in the classroom, the teachers in the present study chose gender-biased books and used gender-biased language in their classrooms. Teacher education may be one way to modify teachers' behavior, by training teachers to use non-biased language and to choose non-biased books and classroom materials.

The present study is limited in that only a small number of classrooms and teachers were observed, and all the classrooms operated within the same school. Follow-up investigations using larger samples are warranted. This study has provided a general description of the inequity which exists in gender representation in children's picture books. This and similar research can lead teachers to create learning environments for children, devoid of gender-bias, in which both boys and girls have access to a wide variety of roles, behaviors, and opportunities.

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Table 1

Proportions of Gendered Characters in Children's Books

Gender of character	Books	
	Library corner	Read out loud
All Characters		
Male	.37	.41
Female	.22	.24
Neutral	.41	.36
	(n = 4352)	(n = 378)
Central Characters		
Male	.70	.65
Female	.24	.29
Neutral	.07	.06
	(n = 542)	(n = 66)

Table 2

Proportions of Gendered Pronouns in Children's Books

	Books		
Gender of Pronoun	Library corner	Read out loud/Actual text	
Masculine	.51	.53	.49
Feminine	.15	.16	.18
Neutral	.34	.30	.33
	(n = 6143)	(n = 1105)	(n = 659)

Note. "Actual text" refers to the written text of books read out loud by the teacher.